



ZIMBABWE FRIENDS OF FREE EXPRESSION DINNER

Bronte Garden Hotel, Harare, Zimbabwe

Wednesday 8 November 2023

Meeting Report

Following its Media Defence Seminar that was held on Wednesday 8 November 2023, at Bronte Garden Hotel in Harare, Zimbabwe, the Campaign for Free Expression (CFE), on the evening of the same day, hosted a consultative dinner meeting targeting civil society organisations, international development agencies/foundations, human rights activists, and media practitioners, among others, to assess the state of freedom of expression in Zimbabwe. The meeting ended up being dominated by media practitioners and representatives, perhaps indicating how the media fraternity was the one predominantly affected by freedom of expression issues or a reflection of a fatigued civil society.

Represented at the meeting were Magamba Network, Zimbabwe Association of Community Radio Stations (ZACRAS), Information for Development Trust (IDT), Gender and Media Connect, Media Alliance of Zimbabwe (MAZ), Zimbabwe National Editors Forum (ZINEF), Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe (VMCZ), Chiedza Media, International Media Support (IMS), and the Irish Embassy. There were 13 participants in total, only 2 people short of the meeting target of 15. Of the 13, only 5 were women.

The meeting purpose was to:

- Identify the main challenges faced by individuals or groups exercising their right to freedom of expression.
- Analyse the legislative environment and how conducive it is to freedom of expression.
- Evaluate the accessibility of media platforms for expressing different opinions and views.
- To assess if some groups or communities face greater challenges in exercising their right to freedom of expression than others. If so, to find out who they are and why this is so.
- To establish the role of government in protecting and promoting freedom of expression.
- To establish some steps that civil society organizations or individuals can take to advocate for greater freedom of expression in Zimbabwe.

Areas of concern for Freedom of Expression in Zimbabwe:

- **Limited credibility of information** - For citizens to effectively enjoy their freedom of expression, access to credible information is vital. However, the proliferation of information disseminators on digital platforms is making it difficult for journalists to conduct their work as they often find themselves in competition with citizen media to 'break' news. The 'burden' to first verify facts before publishing stories means their verified facts will only come after false information has already circulated in most cases. The problem with this is that false news often becomes more viral than the verified facts. This is not a problem for Zimbabwe only.
- **Self-censorship due to fear and political intolerance** - Both ordinary citizens and journalists generally shy away from openly expressing their political views or openly criticizing the government. People resort to hiding behind pseudonyms on social media

platforms to express themselves freely. Self-expression is limited even in closed spaces like family settings. Politics has become a divisive topic and citizens lack trust for one another. To be safe, citizens have developed a general tendency to 'go with the flow' – meaning the views that they express at any given time are carefully curated to suite whoever is the audience of their conversation. This is a problem in that it becomes difficult to determine people's actual views and attitudes.

- **Artistic expression is curtailed** – Some popular artists have had their music banned due to its political content which was critical of the government.
- **Elitism in the exercise of the right to FOE** - Most media platforms are urban centric and only accessible to those that can afford data for internet. This means that some people access information better than others.
- **The right to protest is selectively accorded** – Depending on the subject of the protest, it is very difficult to stage a protest in Zimbabwe. For example, the right to protest the government's poor service delivery is severely limited and is viewed as lack of patriotism; whereas if citizens want to protest against Western sanctions, this would be permissible and would receive coverage from state media. The requirement to notify the police ahead of any protest is a hindrance for organising protests as the authorities always give excuses not to grant permission/clearance for protests in criticism of the government.
- **Cultural influence hinders FOE for some groups** – *Gender inequality* which is perpetuated by Zimbabwe's patriarchal culture accounts for the abuse of women in politics. Female candidates easily get attacked verbally or physically by their male counterparts or the general public. Even views expressed by women in the media are undermined.
- **Closing of civic space** – Civil society in Zimbabwe lacks proper co-ordination due to competition for funds. Collaboration is rare as donor fatigue has rendered the civic space resource limited. There is also a level of neutrality that has taken over the space – where civil society no longer speaks with a strong voice on political issues. This is due to the infiltration of the space by state agents.
- **Lack of an independent judiciary** – A culture of impunity persists in Zimbabwe whereby political and economic elites are not held accountable for their actions because they control the judiciary. This also accounts for the abuse of power by those in control or with the resources, who abuse the law to frustrate dissenting voices, including private media.
- **Limited autonomy for the media** – Most journalists feel pressured to write articles that are only aligned with their Editors' personal views; or due to fear of being targeted, they write articles from the angle that would be approved by those with power instead of telling the story from both sides and highlighting how it affects ordinary citizens. For example, on the issue of mining – the government would only favour stories that highlight the supposed development or economic contribution that the industry brings but a story that highlights how communities that get displaced due to mining activity on their ancestral land suffer as a result are not welcomed. The issue of financial security is another limiting factor for the media, whereby they are cornered into sounding 'politically correct' for fear of being stripped of advertising opportunities from government entities.
- **Retrogressive laws** - Although an Access to Information Law exists, the introduction of new legislation and the amendment of existing laws has been curtailing freedoms. A few examples given of such laws are:
 - **Official Secrets Act**
 - **Patriotic Act**

- **Zimbabwe Media Commission Act**
- **Private Voluntary Organisation Bill**
- **Whistleblower Protection Bill**

The issue with some of these laws, although seemingly positive – like the Whistle blower protection Act, is how loosely they can be interpreted. This allows for abuse by authorities.

- **Partisan access to state media** - In Zimbabwe opposition parties do not have equal freedom to spread information through state media.

Although these were the main issues discussed at the dinner meeting, participants recommended a bigger and more diverse convening of civil society, academics, government departments, and other players in the human rights space. Such a convening was agreed on being a Freedom of Expression Summit to be held in 2024. CFE is working with partners on the ground to plan such a conference.

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